

UEI Community Development Pyramid

Since its inception, the UEI used a bottom-up approach. The UEI team developed a model to show this approach and how it can produce measurable results and create a sustainable infrastructure to ensure community involvement and continued improvements in the future. The model is called the UEI Community Development Pyramid and was unveiled at EPA's National Community Involvement Conference in Kansas City, MO in May 1999. The model uses a five-phase approach to build local capacity from the ground up beginning with identification of issues and stakeholders, then helps develop partnerships and community awareness through each step of the process. The ultimate goal of this model is a sustainable community infrastructure that can access information and leverage resources to address environmental and public health concerns without permanent EPA financial assistance.

Phase 1: Understanding the Problems & Identifying Stakeholders

This phase is the most critical step in a community-based approach to environmental protection. During this phase, the UEI must establish a strong foundation of community stakeholder relationships and begin engaging groups and listening to community priorities. It is also crucial that the community's greatest environmental and public health concerns and issues are prioritized and an honest commitment will be made to work in partnership to solve these problems equitably. The relationships created in Phase I serve as a foundation for future partnerships, collaborations, and projects. Activities include listening to community stakeholder concerns, facilitating public conferences to gather ideas, building relationships with a broad range of community members, and establishing credibility for the UEI in the community. Funding in this phase should support local community-based organizations that are working with residents on environment and public health issues. EPA technical resources are introduced in this phase.

Phase 2: Building Community Capacity & Developing Local Partnerships

During this phase, the UEI begins a focused effort to build a dialogue among stakeholders around a common topic or issue, facilitate working relationships, and start to fill information and data gaps. Effective methods of stakeholder involvement include convening task forces, developing coalitions, establishing networks, and facilitating group meetings. Success in this phase hinges on equal stakeholder involvement, and this goal is oftentimes extremely challenging given inherent disparities in interests, objectives, influences, or resources among different partners. However, these challenges have a much better opportunity for resolution when stakeholders are united by a common goal—such as preventing lead poisoning in children, eliminating urban vacant lots, or restoring a river or wetland to a swimmable, fishable condition. The UEI continues to leverage EPA technical resources through this phase—including supporting sampling efforts to understand the extent of perceived and existing contamination, or starting risk assessment and risk communication. A benefit to community partners is training to share information and provide the tools needed to better understand and resolve problems including GIS mapping, soil sampling techniques, grant management, process management, strategic planning and environmental or public health classes.

Phase 3: Leveraging Public Resources To Improve Public Health & The Environment

Once concerns have been raised, common threads identified, and different stakeholders are starting to work together, leveraging and directing public resources through collaborative projects must focus on achieving measurable results. Typically, this can be achieved through a partnership grant which allows stakeholders to share in a common success, such as turning a vacant lot into a community park in a neighborhood or reaching out to educate teachers in a “Train-the Trainers” program on lead poisoning prevention. In this phase, funding should support multi-stakeholder collaborative projects that are designed to accomplish positive, measurable improvements to public health and the environment.

Projects should also have in-kind or other matching support from a range of organizations. UEI's role in this phase begins by a strong personal investment of the CPM to bring resources to the table to ensure that projects can be completed effectively, and it transitions into other stakeholders at the table supplementing the CPM efforts and position within the process. By the end of Phase 3, the UEI will leverage a broad range of internal EPA resources and assist community partners to ensure that other federal and state resources (technical, human, and fiscal) are identified to pursue together in Phase 4.

Phase 4: Effective Partnerships

As projects are completed, partners share in measurable successes and start to see meaningful results from their partnerships and coalitions. At this point, the coalitions that have been supported through direct UEI and other EPA funding and technical resources have measurable environmental or public health results and a solid foundation to secure funding through other federal or non-federal sources to sustain work. These partnerships can take several different forms, including: local government & non-profit; public & private; state government agency & non-profit; inter-governmental; or other combinations of partners. The key to partnerships at this phase of the pyramid is that the organizations can demonstrate sufficient results and successes thus allowing the partnership to secure funding and resources to diversify and expand on the projects that the UEI supported during Phase 3. UEI financial resources are less intensive at this point in the model and continue to leverage internal technical resources as requested by the partnerships.

Phase 5: Healthy Communities

At this stage in the pyramid, the UEI plays a less visible role at the table in further developing stakeholder partnerships and no longer serves as the lead partner for projects. In fact, the ultimate success of this model is that by Phase 5 the UEI has transitioned out of a prominent and constant role at the table and the work will continue forward with community stakeholders at the lead. This phase indicates that the stakeholders are working together effectively and successfully securing resources to implement the strategy required to resolve their most critical environment and public health problems. This bottom-up model for community infrastructure development and environmental results only remains sustainable when Phase 5 at the top of the pyramid is reached. The UEI Community Development Pyramid demonstrates that this phase by phase approach produces significant, measurable environmental results that require minimal EPA resource investment and yields a maximum return on agency resource investment in urban areas.

UEI Community Development Pyramid

